1: Warner E-5 (1926-1929)1937
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The Wawilak Configuration and the Seasonal Cycle

821 Throughout the native interpretation in which the Wawilak myth
713 and the four rituals are connected point by point and integrated, there is a continual association of the rain and flood with the python which gives us a clue to the wider meaning of the python symbol to the Murngin. The Murngin definitely associate the Wawilak python with the weather and seasonal change. The climatic ideas which surround the python are not latent but conscious and manifest in Murngin thinking. Here we shall examine the python as a weather symbol.

132 The outstanding general natural phenomena are the great seasonal changes which produce heavy rainfall and floods for five months, and for seven months an extremely dry season in which there is no rain and many of the streams, lakes, water holes and inlets dry up. Correlated with this cycle of rainy and dry seasons are the attendant phenomena of changing winds and clouds, greater and less heat, growth and decay of vegetation, birth and growth of the different species of animals, and the appearance of certain birds and insects and the disappearance of others. There is constant need of drastic change in the adaptation of the Murngin economics and technology to fit the constantly changing natural environment.

133 The other fundamental natural phenomenon which is always dramatically before one's eyes is the relation of the land to the ocean, tidal lakes, and rivers. The great tides pour inland for scores of miles, reaching into the flat coastal plains which stretch back to the broken and difficult highlands in the interior. The flat coast land is continuous along the Sea of Arafura and the Gulf of Carpentaria.

823 The Murngin have a most accurate knowledge of the locational, seasonal, and daily variation of the tides. Anyone who has taken a canoe trip with them along the seacoast quickly learns that this knowledge is immense in detail, well organized, and held by all the men. To the Murngin mind the flow of the tide into the Murngin land stands in opposition to the flow of the rivers, particularly at flood time during the rainy season. The reason is obvious when we realize the great heights of the incoming tide and the tremendous flow of flood water which goes to the sea during the rainy season.

133 The central plain which extends from thirty-five to sixty miles in-
134 land at sea level is composed of Tertiary deposits which have produced a very poor soil. Inland the altitude increases from several hundred to a thousand feet. Arnhem Land's highest point (to the west and
000 south of the Murngin) is said to be only 1500 feet high. Because of

15:Chaseling M-5 (ca. 1934-1936)1957
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water-worn canyons—a wild, desolate region where only goannas find enough to eat and white cockatoos screech through the gorges.

Nevertheless, I found it fascinating to fly over this country —no one would toil through swamps and humid jungles if it were possible to fly over them in the coolness and comfort of a plane. Arnhem Bay is typical coastal country, low-lying and well-nigh impenetrable, but during the war years I grew accustomed to looking at it from R.A.A.F. Catalinas and watching its panorama unfold in a succession of meandering grass-choked creeks and swamps, with a narrow ribbon of jungle dividing them from the waters of the bay. White cockatoos circled over black clumps of jungle, white ibises fished in the shallow swamps, and egrets waded on the mudflats and made it appear like a garden of marguerites waving in the breeze.

Even the weather is surprising, and the climate accounts for the poverty of the country. Seven or eight months of the year are cool; that is when the dry, south-east monsoon blows in from the Pacific. Wind and warm sun parch the ground and bush fires rage over the hills and sandy valleys, so that for weeks the sky is hidden in smoke haze and the setting sun is a blood-red ball. Yulengor start fires when hunting and cannot pass dry grass without firing it. It is a common practice for them to strip five or six feet of stringy bark from a tree, twist it into a stiff length, light one end and carry it like a walking stick, stabbing the fiery end into dry grass by the side of the track.

By October the winds are calm, humus has been licked up by the fires, a burning sun completes the destruction, and the country is a barren ash-heap. December brings a change in the wind and, heavily laden with moisture, it blows in from the north-west, flooding the country with torrential rain of from forty to seventy inches. Its immediate effect on dried-out Arnhem Land is devastating, as loose soil, sand, ash, and

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humus are swept into the swamps or out to sea. The residue from this fierce erosion is the typical clay, gravel, and stone of Arnhem Land. Nevertheless, with the first cloudbursts, the harassed country makes an astounding recovery. In an incredibly short time a thick growth of high coarse grass covers the rocky hills and sandy valleys, yams spring to life on gravel slopes, and animal and bird life is rejuvenated; red kangaroos, agile wallabies, opossums, mice, snakes, goannas, emus, jungle fowls, ducks, geese, spoonbills, herons, brolgas, and many more in kind grow fat and lazy from the lavish hand of nature. But the vicious circle is not to be avoided. Winds swing back to the south-east and the nightmare of poverty again creeps over the land.

Exploring in the north-east brought us into contact with most of the scattered hordes so frequently referred to as the 'Killers of Arnhem Land'. In early September we were in the English Company's Islands, with the crew on the look-out for Yulengor; and when they saw a thin column of smoke on a beach, conjecture was rife as to who was in the camp. A dozen men and boys paddled out in their big dug-out canoes and came aboard somewhat diffidently. However, they were soon squatting round the hatch exchanging news with the crew, all the time passing the one and only bush pipe backwards and forwards and drawing deeply the first tobacco smoke they had tasted for months. Most of them were strong and well developed, with bushy hair, but not too clean. As a concession to the white man they had donned strips of bark on string waistbands. They were reserved, but interested in all we did, and gladly accepted a couple of tomahawks, wire for fish-spears, and fish-hooks.

After the visitors had cast-off in their canoes, a crew-boy mentioned that our visitors had just returned from killing a man in revenge for the death of another in the hills behind our anchorage. It was a long story of intrigue and murder,